

IDENTIFIED

By Richard Washburn Child

Two Men in the Dark; and What Happened When One Switched on the Light

THE rain was not of the kind which drizzles a suggestion of tame sadness; it came on at nightfall with a rush of cold autumn wind and covered the city with the wall and violence of wild tragic forecast. Perhaps there was in it also the laughter, the hysterical laughter of the gods of Fate.

Uptown there is a certain apartment building; the owners of it have asked that its name be withheld. Reason enough! The place is most respectable; even more—some apartments there rent for twelve thousand a year.

At 8 o'clock a taxicab, skidding over the black asphalt, came to a stop before this magnificent cliff-dwellers' structure and stood panting and steaming in the downpour. No one behind the lighted windows above could hear it because the wind and rain and swirl and howl of the storm from the sea, bringing its clamor of hitherto untold secrets from the Atlantic, drowned the thumping of its engine.

A man in a gray tweed storm coat and wearing a black derby with a square top paid the taxicab driver through the window and made a run through the deluge for the front door. He did not open that door at once, but peered in through the plate-glass—perhaps to see whether or not the uniformed elevator boy was sitting under the palms in the marble lobby. While he stared from the darkness and the rain beat down upon him the taxicab rounded the next corner and was gone. The man turned nervously, as if he had suddenly felt eyes upon him. It is extraordinary how few are the places and times when at least one pair of human eyes—and often the particular, fateful pair—do not see. And now, fateful or not, there was a chance. Across the street, under the overhanging dripping lower branches of a park tree, but almost indistinguishable through the diagonals and the flowing veils of rain and darkness, the man at the door saw a human figure.

He drew his head down into the collar of his coat, as an offended turtle, and, opening the door into the vacant lobby, made his way to the apartment formerly occupied by a specialist in brain surgery who went to France with a certain medical unit in 1915, having moved out all of his things and directed certain well known real estate agents to sublease for the balance of his term.

That the man who entered on this night was the sublessee appeared probable. It was evident that he had been in and out often enough. Without touching the electric switches he reached for a cigar from the half emptied box on the hall stand, and though the whole apartment was as dark as the inside of a shutterless camera, his fingers moved accurately. He felt along the wall, across the tapestry that hung invisible there, and entered the living room where the rain dripped from the rough tweed and from the rim of his peculiar hat onto the polished floor. He went across the room to a screen made of old Spanish embossed leather and behind its protection he lit his cigar with a short, quick tiny flare of a match and drew a deep inhalation of the smoke. A violent spell of coughing resulted, but the man did not care about that; there was no one else in the apartment and the doors and window glass were luxuriously heavy and almost sound proof.

Indeed, the man spoke aloud when his cough ceased. He said, "That's the third time!"

Immediately, as if his remarks were connected in some way with the figure he had seen, he went to the front windows, and, parting the heavy curtains a little, he stared out into the rain.

The storm still wailed its threats, its warnings, its dead men's tales, and the rain and darkness outside were mixed like a thick black batter. Suddenly another taxicab, turning the corner a block or two away, with its radiant eyes threw a thin, milky light along the tree tops, whipped and twisted, staggered and thrashed in the wind like a motley lot of drunken soldiers. The figure, which had been slinking in their shelter on the sidewalk, had gone.

The man within, however, was not at ease; drawing off his overcoat and hat, he threw them away from him onto an expensive rug. "The devil," said he.

There was a long pause of silence, as if the man was meditating, but then, as if he had called to one who waited a summons, there came the tinkle of falling glass in the rear of the apartment. Afterward all was still again except for a new sound—the sound of the storm, as if it had found its way through some aperture. Its roar had been reduced to whispers, but they were whispers of the sea of dismal wastes, of the unsealed lips of those who have died by violence. The voices rose in shrieks, suggestive of the blasts of wind and the wet swashed night. And into the heavy warm air of the apartment laden with its mixed odors of stale and fresh cigar smoke there ran rivulets and tiny streams of colder air, smelling of the salt of the sea, wet, cold, salty, like slips of iced clam juice.

The man stooped his tall, graceful figure and became a reptile, alert in the face of danger, apprehensive of some invader who, under cover of the noise of the storm, had made an entrance into the rear of the building. The lessee of the \$12,000 a year flat, with his face twisted into an ugly grin, crawled and crawled snake-like along the wall, crouched behind a leather chair, fat with luxurious upholstery, and there he waited like a poisonous lizard in ambush.

A dull came in the faraway murmur of the storm, and he could hear faintly the mumble of movements in the apartment above; he could hear the faint rattle of a paper disturbed by the puffs of air entering the broken window in the distant kitchen and coming through the series of rooms and doorways between. He could hear something else, too; it was the tiny splash of water in a pair of shoes. The feet in these shoes were put down cautiously. They approached almost noiselessly and with irritating pauses of caution. Squish! Then silence. Squish. A long wait. . . . Squish!

He, who was behind the chair, realized that these sounds were fading, the water in the shoes had been running out. Soon the feet would proceed silently. They would approach without noise. He listened. No squish. He waited long, breathless moments. No sound! The intruder might have stopped. He might

be coming on with silent, sliding paces. The man in hiding waited with his thin lips twisting back and forth across the edges of his even, white teeth. His ears having failed to register the movements of the other, he drew in slow noiseless breaths through his long nose, hoping to find in the air some telltale odor of the other person.

It came when the intruder passed the chair in the thick syrup of the darkness; it was the smell of wet woolen clothing, of soaked leather, of stale rain water, seasoned with the prickly smell of some spice, perhaps cloves. A moment or two later the one who had passed collided with the wall at the front end of the living room.

There was an imprecation and later a sigh; the newcomer, feeling a way through the mud of the dark, had evidently been assured that the apartment was empty. From that moment the movements showed that caution had been laid aside. Crossing the room diagonally, the moving feet collided with a leather couch and then went on carelessly until their owner had found the wall again. The sound of fingers feeling along the knee cloth paper stopped at the wide entrance to the front hall of the apartment, and then there came a whisper as if the voice of the person had said, "Ha!"—as if, indeed, a goal had been reached. A chair was moved and then the intruder sat down; the cushion gave forth a sigh as air was expelled from it under the sudden application of weight.

The man, who had subleased this apartment, waited impatiently. He wondered so doubt why the other person had gone to so much pains to break in if he were to be satisfied to sit down in a comfortable chair and relieve a passing weariness. If one came to do something, let him do it! But the other merely sighed and made a sound like that of a wet tongue moving across dry lips.

To be crouching behind a chair unable to move a muscle without risk of disclosure would become unendurable. The man who was doing it felt the ache of strained position slowly saturate his sinews and then eat into the marrow of his bones. Twenty minutes passed. He could stand it no longer.

Slowly, painfully he rose from his crouching. He extended his left hand behind him until it touched the wall. The fingers of his hand crept along the wainscoting to the door jamb; they crept cautiously back until they came in contact with a familiar plunger of an electric switch. He pressed it. An explosion of light!

One fraction of a second was enough to photograph with exactness the details shown by this flood, this bath, this assault of sudden glare which exposed the room.

The stranger who had come in like a bird of evil omen from the storm was seated facing the door, and the light caught an expression on his face which was suggestive of the grim mood of one who patiently waits for his prey. His was a lean and angular frame, and lean arms were resting on sharp angled elbows. All his angularity was emphasized by the fact that his clothing was water-soaked and the dark blue serge of an old suit was clinging closely to his lean, strong limbs and his lean, strong body. In his long fingered right hand he held an instrument of battery, persuasion and unconsciousness often called, a "life preserver." It was made of black leather with a knob filled with bird shot, and it dangled like the limp neck of a poisonous and death dealing asp for the moment relaxed in sleep.

When its owner turned, his face appeared white, haggard, of exaggerated length. Its wrinkles were deep—deep in the high forehead, deep around the eyes, deep at the base of the long nose and around the mouth with its thin red lips parted in a smile, either sad or vicious, which appeared as fixed as if the lower part of the countenance were molded in plaster paris, and therefore gave to the man a strange appearance of inscrutability.

"Throw that blackjack on the floor," commanded the other man. "I've got you covered, my fine visitor."

The intruder stared into the toothless mouth of a blue steel revolver barrel and without changing a line of his unreadable face he relaxed his fingers and his implement of attack fell onto the hardwood floor.

If a third pair of eyes could have stared in upon these two men who met each other's gaze, it would have seen in the setting of a large room filled with new rich furniture and new rich hangings, a remarkable contrast between two individuals. This contrast was almost amusing because, superficially, the men were alike. Both were lean and tall, both had long faces and high foreheads, both had deep set eyes and heavy brows, both were without beards except for the uncut stubble which had blackened the mouth and chin of the one in the chair.

The foremost difference between them was in their comparative activity. The lessee of the apartment was eternally in movement; his face twitched, his mouth squirmed, his eyes shifted as if every thought disturbed their position, and at every half dozen breaths he snuffed his nose as if there were some hard and bony growth obstructing the free intake of air. His free hand moved its long fingers. The thumb rubbed imaginary pellets against the nervous tips of the digits.

The other man, the visitor from the storm, was like a carved wooden thing. His deep set eyes stared without expression; his body was motionless. Even the cords on his neck, showing above a flannel shirt collar, remained as they had fixed themselves when he turned his head. Both men were gray, but the hair of the visitor was well arranged, as it had been when he removed his soft felt hat; the hair of the host was a tangle through which he had run his nervous fingers.

"I've got you," said the latter, in a rather thin but low voice—the voice of one used to the customs and conversation of gentle persons.

"Yes, you got me," the other replied. "I know that. Now go ahead and send for the police."

"Send for the police?" the armed man said. "Why, yes. I hadn't thought."

He appeared rather surprised at the suggestion.

"You're lucky I didn't kill you," said he. "You came in here to steal, eh? Maybe to slug me with that thing you had in your paw. Why did you sit down?"

"Cold and tired," the other answered. The host sat down in the leather chair behind which he had hidden; he rested the revolver on his knee and smiled.



Illustrated by HERBERT MORTON STOOPS



The intruder stared into the toothless mouth of a blue steel revolver.

His smile was not a gentle and fixed and inscrutable smile such as appeared on the face of his visitor as he sat with his wet clothes steaming, but a smile of shrewdness, resource, craft.

"This is interesting," he said suddenly. "Very interesting. Let me introduce myself to you. I am Valentine—Edes Valentine. I take it you are one of those gentlemen who are proud of the title of yegg. Aren't you a bit old for the game?"

"I'm 51," said the other in a dull and noncommittal voice. "Where are you from, Mr. Valentine?"

"From Paris," said the other sharply. "That so? Well—here we are."

"Good!" said Valentine. "I like that spirit. If one is to be villainous it is an art to be villainous cheerfully. All the better if one is a professional villain. Come, Mr.—"

"Blank—Mr. Blank," prompted the visitor.

"Well, Mr. Blank, as you choose to call yourself, sit there in that chair for a moment. If you will pardon me, I'll ask you not to move so that I will not have the pain of shooting a round and uncomfortable hole in your head."

Valentine stepped swiftly backward until he could peer between the heavy curtains at the front window. He looked out again into the blackness of the night and heard faintly the wail of the wind which washed the water against the plate glass. Then he returned.

"I have an idea," he said.

"What's the idea?" asked Blank.

"I was thinking about life."

"I was about death," said the other.

"Tut-tut," continued Valentine. "My idea is a much more happy idea. I was thinking about the contrast between us, my friend."

"I admit it," said the other.

"I want to make a proposition," Valentine went on. "Yes, to you. It was a happy thought. You have suggested it and it is a very happy thought. It appeals to my imagination. It appeals to my whimsical sense. I think I can say that it is a thought of genius."

"Yes," said the water-soaked man. "What's the idea?"

"It's this," Valentine said eagerly, as if he were a skilled salesman seizing his opportunity to state terms. "Here we are. You are 51. I don't know your history. I don't care. Went wrong

Spent time in jail. Maybe learned the ways of whisky. Maybe find your ease in cocaine. But misery is your middle name. I know that. I know the thing you want is money, luxury. You are through with your old love of adventure. If you want a vacation from a life of crime, it's yours. I'm going to give it to you."

"When?" came the dull voice.

"Now!" said the host. "Right now. Let me say a word about myself."

For the first time the man who, with a dry sense of humor perhaps, had called himself Blank, appeared to take an interest.

"You've told me my life," he said. "Now are you going to tell me yours? Straight?"

"No, not much. Why is that necessary? Call me a lonely bachelor, rich, living in luxury. I've just moved on here. Got a bank account. In that drawer are five thousand negotiable bonds. Now, my friend, the life I lead is the life you seek."

"Do it?" asked the other.

"Isn't it?" said Valentine with easy assurance.

"Certainly it is. It represents a vacation from adventure. To me it represents a ghastly monotony. God! I can't stand it!"

"And what do you want?" asked the other.

"I want a taste of poverty, my friend. Poverty, adventure, freedom! It never occurs to you fellows that there is a rare charm in being out in all kinds of weather and having to shift for the next meal by one's wits. O, I tell you the rich sometimes envy you fellows—you outcasts, you hunted ones. If you only knew the artifice of our lives—wretched, wretched fellows. Lonely? It's ghastly. Nothing to live with but our own damnable thoughts!"

"Is that so?" asked the other. "I just wish I could be sure that you were telling the truth. I wish I knew something. I wish I knew why you have been in Paris."

"That? Been in Paris? O, that's easy. I went there because I was bored to death. That's why I came here to this big place. But there is no relief. I just want to drop out of sight. I want to get rid of all this accursed luxury."

He whirled about and indicated the rich furnishings, the wainscoting, the

paneled walls, the lighting fixtures, the pictures, the rug, with a dramatic sweep of his long arm. His countenance was pale and tense; his thin lipped mouth squirmed against its white setting like a red worm.

He came close to the other man whose eyes never changed their expression and whose lower face still wore the smile that might have been sad or vicious, defying any one to say which. He came so close that the man in the chair could feel his breath upon his leathery cheek.

"Let's change," said Valentine. "You take my place, I take yours."

"I never heard of such a thing," the other man grumbled. "It's ridiculous. Some trick!"

"No. No. For God's sake, believe me," the host exclaimed. He acted as if he were going to drop on to his lank knees in a sudden hysteria of pleading. "I mean it all. You came here to rob me, eh? Well, you can't do it. Why? Because you shall have everything here. It is yours. Look! A wallet of several hundred dollars. This apartment for at least a month."

The other interrupted with a laugh.

"The janitor would have me sent away tomorrow," he said.

"No, he wouldn't. I've been here only a few days. He's never seen me," said Valentine. "Not even the elevator boy. You just say you are Mr. Valentine."

"Huh!" said Blank. "Me? Say that? In these clothes?"

He looked down at his water-soaked serge and at the old battered felt hat, then at Valentine, who was clad in perfectly tailored, light colored homespun and whose conspicuous derby hat and tweed overcoat were on the rug beside the table.

"Ha! Clothes, eh? My dear friend, you do not understand. I change with you even to clothes."

"You'd put on these wet old garments, eh?"

"Certainly. For there is nothing unless it is complete. I become you. You become me. I take your name—your fake name—Blank. You take mine, Edes Valentine. Apartment, a bit of a fortune in this bundle of negotiable bonds, a warm bath, my toilet things. You can engage servants if you wish. My bed—it is comfortable. A shave. A wallet of money. Three months at least of comfort. Real gold paid at a twelve thousand

a year rate. Take my name, take my appearance, take my clothes!"

The other was suspicious, apparently. He said, "This doesn't look good to me. What do I have to do for all this, eh?"

"Give me your own clothes—that's all. That's all you have to do. Just become me for a time. I leave my shoes. You step into them. No one will come here who knows me. Maybe there's just a chance—a stranger or two will come on a matter of business. But they've never seen me. Tell 'em you're Valentine and send 'em off."

"And you?" said the intruder.

"Me? Why, as for me, I'll just go back to the window into which you came and I'll go out—out into the night, the wind and the rain. I'll be swallowed, eh? I'll be nobody. I'll find relief from the grind of money, luxury, hollow sham, stately, ghastly loneliness."

"You mean you'll go and come back sometime?"

"Yes, if I want I'll come back."

"And I can go at any time?"

"Yes."

"You'll go out into the storm, eh? I become you and you become me? That it?"

"Yes."

"Will you change clothes with me? Take my wet ones down to the last stitch. Will you take 'em off here under the light? And swap with me?"

"Yes."

"And that gun?"

"I'll take it with me. It might be useful. You came out of a life of adventuring—out of the underworld. What would be your advice?"

The other sighed. "I'd advise you to take it," he admitted. "Never pull it until you want to kill."

He continued to smile the carved wooden smile, but his eyes moved away from Valentine's and he looked about, fixing his gaze at last upon a strange sheathed knife on the great antique table under the light of a decorative oriental lamp.

"What's that knife?" he asked.

"That? Why, that's a curio," said Valentine, drawing it from its sheath. It was thin of blade, with a slight curve in its length—an ugly thing, a thing which makes one draw back as from the hair edge of a razor blade or the fang of a snake. Its curve was like that—like a snake's thin needle fang.

"Where's it from?" asked the other.

"It's from Argentina," said Valentine, quickly. "It's called a 'Tala.'"

"I thought you said you came here from Paris. Have you ever been in Argentina?"

"No. I bought it in Paris. It fascinated me. I bought it. A curio."

"That so?"

The other man appeared to lose his interest as quickly as it had arisen.

"Well?" asked Valentine. "How about it?"

"About what?"

"The change."

"O, yes, the change. Well, go on."

"Go on!"

"Yes. Take off your clothes."

"Ha!" exclaimed Valentine, as if he had triumphed.

He put his revolver on the table, threw off his homespun coat and waistcoat, took the silk suspenders from his shoulders, unbuttoned a fine linen shirt.

"Come on," said he. "You, too."

"All right," the other said, as if awakening from a dream, but without taking his gaze from the drooping host.

"I'm kind of ashamed of these clothes," he confessed as he drew off the articles of woolen and cotton, all wet and limp with the rain.

At last the two men faced each other not more than five paces apart. The visitor stood without a shred of clothing. His figure was like that of Valentine, but it was not white of skin like his host. Exposure had made his hide more leathery and coarse and there was more hair upon his stark limbs.

"Take off that undershirt," said he to his benefactor. "I want that, too. An agreement is an agreement."

Valentine hesitated, but smilingly he drew off the last garment which covered his lean body.

"Hello!" said the other man.

"What?"

"That mark. That mark on your chest. A tattoo, eh? Do gentlemen have tattoo marks?"

Valentine smiled.

"It was done in the folly of youth."

"Looks like the mark of some order, some lodge, some society."

"A boy's whim," replied the other.

"That's all."

He looked back into the unreadable gaze of the stranger.

"Guess you'll find my clothes wet and cold," the intruder was saying as he pointed to the repulsive pile he had thrown at Valentine's feet.

"Nothing," said the host, who had seized the other's clothing as if he regarded it as symbolic of all that was desirable in life. "What are you staring at. Why do you look at me so?"

"Who wouldn't?" the other man said. "I don't strike a proposition like this every day. Or a man like this every day. Or a man like you."

The host smiled again as if he did not mind the clammy clinging garments in which he had dressed himself. He said to the other man. "You look the part. I am proud to have you say that you are Edes Valentine. Don't forget the name. Get a shave after I have gone. It will be the finishing touch. Only hurry. I am anxious to leave."

"To go out?"

"Yes."

"Into nowhere?"

"Yes, into the great and lovely nowhere," said the host with a laugh. "Are we ready?"

"Sure."

"Then I'll say—"

"Wait!" interrupted the stranger. "I was just forgetting. Feel in that left hand breast pocket. What do you feel?"

"Something like a big lock."

"Yes. Take it out."

Valentine stared down at the glided thing in his long fingered, well-manicured hand.

"Do I take this with me?" he said with a laugh.

"No."

"Where did you get it? I suppose in the—usual way?"

"Yes. Open it."

Valentine inserted his thumb nail in the fingered edge. He appeared irritated. "I want to have this moment over," he said.

"Before you go out there and through